

The Case for a Ministry of Women's Rights:

(within the BC-NDP government –ed.)

A document introduced by BC-LSA member Cynthia Flood, written by Melodie Corrigan and Sharon Yandle for the BC feminist magazine **Priorities**. *Note annotations by Ross Dowson throughout and his note on page 20.*

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The Case for a

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Notations

MINISTRY of WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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A PUBLICATION
OF THE
B.C. NDP WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

Not Behind

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INTRODUCTION

By CYNTHIA FLOOD

CYNTHIA FLOOD (Vancouver-Centre) is a member of the Priorities Editorial Committee.

The articles in this pamphlet are among the products of one of the most remarkable political phenomena of the 20th century — the development of a world-wide movement of women in search of change in their situations. Women of all ages, races and walks of life have been attracted to the ideas and arguments of the women's liberation movement, and there is no institution of our society which remains unaffected by them.

Expressions of feminist views cover an enormous range of activities. An elderly woman secretary now insists that her "boss", a young man fresh from business school, stop calling her by her first name while expecting her to call him "mister". A young woman demands that her doctor take the time to give her the fullest possible information on types of birth control available, and further demands a voice in deciding which she should use. A factory worker stands up in her union meeting to move that no contract be accepted which allows for lower pay to women for performing work equivalent to men's. A young mother organizes a protest at the local school against the practice of excluding girls from certain sports on the grounds that they are "too weak". A woman student speaks up in class to ask why her male professor is dismissing the leaders of the suffrage movement as "a bunch of neurotic women". A woman in a psychiatric ward insists — though probably few listen to her — that her "problems" are not caused by her failure to adjust to the rôle of wife and mother *only*, but by the limitations which that rôle imposes on her.

These examples all relate to individuals; on the level of organized group activity on the part of women, there is the same wide scope. In the past five years or so, women's organizations have formed by hundreds in North America and probably by thousands around the world. Women have fought for equal pay on the job, and for access to better-paying jobs; for the right to some control over their bodies through repeal of anti-abortion laws; for the availability of more, better and cheaper childcare facilities; for an end to the exploitation of women as sexual objects in advertising; for changes in laws relating to separation, divorce and child custody; for the right of women to sexual freedom, including the full recognition of lesbian relationships; for an end to discrimination in the educational

system through the use of anti-female texts and rigid "channelling" of every kind; for recognition of women's creative and artistic achievements — and this is only a partial list.

The ultimate direction and significance of all this activity is, to socialists, very clear. Given our understanding that the oppressed and disadvantaged in our society are so not because of any inherent inferiority but because of inequalities built into the society itself, we know that struggles initiated by the disadvantaged and oppresses have finally only one possible solution: radical change in the social and political structures of humankind. All socialists therefore should respond with enthusiasm and strong support to the efforts of women — one-half of the population — to organize for the winning of our rights since our struggles and victories can only accelerate and strengthen the overall struggle towards full liberation for all.

The articles which follow relate to the efforts of a particular group of women — those who are members of the New Democratic Party — to win changes and improvements in the situations and lives of women in B.C. The Standing Committee on Women's Rights within the party has, in the past few years, conducted many activities with this end in view. It has sponsored conferences on women's rights, sent speakers to gatherings of many kinds, supported the struggles of other women's organizations, started a Newsletter (*Priorities*), encouraged women NDPers to stand for party office, and organized for the passage of women's rights resolutions at annual conventions. This pamphlet is intended as a further contribution to the process of organizing and strengthening the women's movement.

At the B.C. NDP Provincial Convention of November, 1972, the following resolution was presented to the delegates and was enthusiastically passed:

"Whereas British Columbia has seen in the past several years the growth of a Women's Movement formed to secure redress to a wide range of social problems directly affecting women, a movement that has brought many women to the support of the NDP and which, in turn, the NDP has supported; and whereas these problems, which include child care issues, educational concerns, employment discrimination and others, are most acutely experienced and understood by women themselves; therefore be it resolved that the 1972 Provincial Convention of the NDP call for the establishment of a Ministry of Women's Rights in the next sitting of the Legislature, to work with other Departments on all issues affecting women directly, including relevant aspects of labour legislation, child care, health and welfare, education, and other similar areas of concern; that this Ministry be headed by a woman; and that the selection of this Minister be made after consultation with the Women's Committee of the NDP."

Neither this resolution, nor any other aspect of party policy specif-

government elected in August 1972. However, the question of the Ministry has generated a great deal of discussion, debate and general activity among women NDPers; in a sense it appears to have acted as a catalyst for innumerable women concerned about the issues of women's liberation as they relate to the NDP. The months since the Provincial Convention have seen the emergence of a whole number of new women's groups within the party. The amount of party discussion on women's rights has sharply increased, and is on a much higher level than ever before. The rôle of women within the NDP has come under intense and highly critical examination. Women and women's liberation are being taken seriously.

The following articles provide motivation for the resolution on the Ministry, and for the urgent need for the government to make the women's rights policy of the NDP a reality. (Each article is preceded by a brief Note, indicating its original source or explaining the situation in which the particular speech was given.) The texts have been edited in order to clarify certain references, remove repetition, and eliminate material not immediately relating to the main topic, but they are in essence reproduced here as originally written or presented.

A MINISTRY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

"IT IS JUST THE BEGINNING"

By ROSEMARY BROWN

ROSEMARY BROWN was elected a Member of the Legislative Assembly on 30 August 1972, and represents the constituency of Vancouver-Burrard. The following is excerpted from a speech given in the Legislature by Ms. Brown on February 1973, in reply to the Speech from the Throne. The source is B.C. 'Hansard'.

"Now, Mr. Speaker, I am not so naive as to think that the hopes and dreams embodied in any bill will be realized once that bill is introduced. The introduction of a bill of rights is not the end; indeed, it is just the beginning. To ensure the equality of all we must introduce, for a while at least, special measures to ensure the catching up of those groups in our society who have fallen behind because of the inequalities which until now have existed in it.

You see, Mr. Speaker, life is like a long distance race, and like all long distance races it is run on a curved track. A curved track, with a straight line as a starting line, and I am sure you will agree that this is most unfair. And always the inside lanes have gone to the white middle- and upper-class male in our society.

And so, if the dream of this bill is to be realized by the women of this province, and by the poor and by the other minority groups who have traditionally drawn the outside lanes of the track in this race, the starting line will have to be staggered. And the further from the inside track that one is running, the greater will be the need for the starting line to be staggered.

And if this Government is serious in its wish that all people should enjoy equality, then those sections of the population which have been treated unequally in the past must have special measures designed for them for a period, at least until they too are equal.

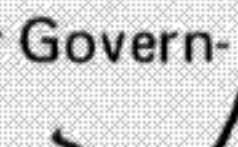
A human rights Act is a beautiful thing. A bill of rights is a magnificent thing. They are always welcome. But by themselves they are never enough. No human rights Act, no bill of rights will ever be enough. And that is what the women — that 52 per cent of our population who have been disadvantaged, discriminated against and oppressed — are saying when they say to you, Mr. Premier, through you, Mr. Speaker, that they would like a Ministry of Women's Rights. That is what Sylvia Gelber, the

Director of the Ontario Women's Bureau was saying when she referred to women as the "underemployed, underpaid third of the labour force." And that is what the female dietary aides at Riverview Hospital and the striking women of Sandringham Hospital are saying. They are the experts of underemployment and they are the experts of underpay.

And those women who have chosen to remain at home and raise and nurture their families, that is what they are saying when they speak of insecurity. That is what the women of the University of British Columbia — that bastion of higher learning and humanitarian thought — are saying when they publish statistics that show that, despite equal qualifications, few of them are ever permitted to attain the higher ranks of the academic departments. And that is also what the women of U.B.C. are saying when they publish statistics that show that we are educating fewer women than men and that we are educating them less.

And this is what the working women in British Columbia are saying when they ask why there are so few women in the upper echelon of the civil service of this province, and why there are so many women on welfare, and why there are so many women between the ages of 55 and 65 existing below the poverty line.

... What better time than now, Mr. Speaker; what better Government than this, to right those wrongs."



A MINISTRY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

"A BREAKTHROUGH FOR THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT"

By MELODIE CORRIGALL

MELODIE CORRIGALL, a member of Vancouver-Burrard, is the Chairwoman of the B.C. NDP Women's Committee. She presented the speech which follows at the January, 1973 Convention of the Young New Democrats in Vancouver.

We have all discussed imperialism and have an understanding of its meaning. As socialists we condemn imperialism wherever it appears. We have also begun to understand the problem of racism in recent years and, as socialists, we condemn it. These are both aspects of the capitalist system, which has historically exploited one group after another.

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NB The oppression of women, dealing as it does with a group that cuts across racial lines, economic classes and national boundaries, has been less well understood. The liberation of women is a radical idea — it introduces a challenge that has never been adequately met by any society. Not many people actually understand the significance of the challenge. The goal of NDP women is not to reform the society but to bring about a truly egalitarian socialist society.

One reason why Women's Liberation has caused such hostility, and why even radical men are not usually enthusiastic supporters, is that if women get more power, men must give some up. We're not talking about something theoretical or something down the street. We're talking about the way we, as men and women, treat one another and how we define and restrict one another along sexual lines. We're talking about the position of women in the NDP and the YND. We're talking about the home and the office and the oppression that goes on there. In other words, we're talking about here and now — action not theory.

Until recently, even many socialist men and women were under the impression that progress was being made towards sexual equality and that it would come about eventually. Individual women still suffered discrimination, but even they usually felt that the problem was personal, not social. Of course the majority of Canadians still clung to the idea that whatever was, was right; that women were naturally suited only to be wives and mothers; that women were biologically passive, supportive, and frivolous while men were aggressive, independent and rational. This was and still is by some considered to be natural, as it is considered natural, by

some, for some races to be inferior and therefore suited only to manual labour.

The myth that anyone could reach the top in any chosen profession by working hard enough never included in its definition of "anyone" women or non-wasps. Now, happily, that false myth is on its death bed. Most people recognize that it takes more than elbow grease and a pure heart to get from the slums to a position of power.

The Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, published in 1970, proved what many had known to be true. Things weren't getting better for women. In fact, they still aren't. Women still aren't in positions of power, and still have little say over things affecting their lives. The Report stressed that inequality isn't a personal problem; it is a social problem. For those who are unsure of the extent of the inequality, study of the Status of Women Report or of any of the publications of the Women's Bureau will document what can be seen and what women experience in every group and institution in Canada — left, right or centre.

As socialists our aim is not for women to become more aggressive or competitive and fight their way to power. What we are struggling for is a redistribution of power so that women can take their rightful place, and a redefinition of women as human beings, not sexual objects. Having begun to realise the extent of the problem, women have been working towards some solutions.

Women's oppression is felt in every area of society, and some cause such suffering that women have fought for reform in these areas. As socialists we see these issues as part of a general policy direction — many issues, however, can be co-opted.

Abortion is an example of what I'm referring to. We do not consider this the best method of birth control, but until safe, effective birth control is available to all women, it is often necessary. As socialists we fight for abortion on demand to relieve the suffering of women who do not want to have a child for psychological, economic or physical reasons. We fight because we believe that a woman should have the right to make decisions about her own life and that a child should have the right to be born into a situation where he or she is wanted and will be cared for. What we are saying, in broader terms, is that people should have the right and power to make decisions about their own lives.

Abortion, however, is not in itself alien or contrary to capitalist philosophy. Overpopulation is considered by many Canadians to be a problem — it would not threaten the system if abortion laws were made more humane. However, even on this issue the men in power have felt they are better able than the woman concerned to decide whether she should have a child.

As socialists, we see that there are more than a few flaws in society that can be rectified by some bandaging. The exploitation and oppression of women is part of the fabric of our society, for which women act as

NB unpaid housekeepers and child-rearers. They form a large pool of cheap labour to be used when needed. They are the secretaries to men, the workers in the service industry, the clerks, the support staff. The position of women in the NDP has not been much different from women's position outside the party. Out of 38 B.C. NDP MLA's only five are women; only one executive assistant in Victoria is a woman; only four women were elected to the B.C. provincial executive. Federally, only one NDP MP is a woman. All but one of the NDP Provincial Secretaries (the only paid executive position) are men.

Our party is a party which supposedly understands that the inequalities of the present economic system are built into the society. We realise that things won't change through lip-service to ideals. As democratic socialists, one of our aims is the redistribution of power. This can only be achieved by political means. As women, there are two kinds of demands we can make. One is to press for individual reforms. If there are enough of us and we are vocal enough, the men in power may grant us our demands. We would have certain reforms but still no power.

Let us look at the analogous situation of factory workers unhappy with their working conditions. If the workers demand a pay increase of, say, five cents an hour, and have to strike to get it, eventually management may agree to their demands and so the workers return to their jobs. All they have is five cents more an hour. However, if they demand a say in their working conditions — even something comparatively small like control over the speed of the conveyor belt, for example, and if they succeed in winning this demand, they will have made a fundamental change in their relationship to management. They will have gained some small control over their working life and shown that it is their right to demand such control.

NB The resolution for the Ministry of Women's Rights was such a demand. Unlike the resolutions calling for abortion on demand or equal pay it recognized the pervasiveness of the problem. It was aimed at creating a decision-making body for women — a body with power.

Although everyone who voted for the resolution might not have realised it, the call for the Ministry recognized the following points and as such is a break-through for the women's movement and for women in the NDP.

1. Sexual inequality does exist and it must be dealt with.
2. Socialism can only be attained when women become full and equal citizens.
3. Women's inequality is a social problem and can only be solved politically.
4. Issues related to women are always given a low priority, and will continue to be treated in this manner by the civil service in Victoria and elsewhere. No bureaucracy is committed to the idea of equality for women. The B.C. civil service is a vivid example of a male-dominated structure

where women, except for exceptional cases, are support staff and have no opportunity for advancement.

5. Part of the solution is for women themselves to have the power and opportunity to make decisions for themselves.

A Ministry would have the power, funds and staff necessary to tackle the problem, and be committed to doing so.

6. No other department can begin to grapple with the problem of women's inequality. Any other solution such as a Committee to study women's rights, a Department of Human Affairs, or an Ombudswoman would leave women in a low priority category. The creation of such bodies would in fact be a step backwards, as it would give the temporary impression that something was being done. Also, a Department of Human or Citizen's Rights would not recognize the crux of the problem — that women are oppressed and exploited not because they are human, but because they are women.

A MINISTRY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

A STRUCTURAL SOLUTION

By SHARON YANDLE

SHARON YANDLE is a member of the Priorities Editorial Committee and also of the Democrat Editorial Committee. She is Delegate to the Provincial Council from her constituency, Vancouver-East. She presented this speech at the Lower Mainland Regional Conference on the Ministry of Women's Rights, held in Vancouver on 10 February, 1973.

Not long ago a CBC program featured Germaine Greer, well-known feminist and author of good books, who was speaking on a range of issues involved in the women's movement — problems in education, discrimination in employment, oppressive poverty and insecurity, sexist laws, poor medical treatment, and so on. In the midst of her comments she was interrupted by the interviewer, who said: "Ms. Greer, when you speak of women's liberation you speak of almost every social institution we have; you talk of so many changes needed that I wonder, does one have to be a socialist to be a women's liberationist?" Germaine Greer paused for a minute and replied, "No, but it really helps."

I raise this incident now even though I'm here to talk about the Ministry of Women's Rights which was proposed by the NDP Women's Committee and endorsed by the B.C. Provincial Convention in November 1972. I raise it because I don't think one can really deal with the rationale behind the Ministry or the pro's and con's of the idea without first dealing with the fundamental questions involved in the women's movement, and particularly in the NDP Women's Movement. I am referring to the question of why NDP women are in the women's movement at all and why people in the women's movement are in the NDP, and to some basic political questions that have to do with being socialists, in a corporate, capitalist society, with the way we look at things in general, with the kind of general social changes we want to see throughout society, and with the kind of future we want. So if you will bear with me, I would like to take a round-about route to the question of the Ministry of Women's Rights before actually getting on to the runway.

As socialists, we view this society differently from the way liberals view it — I mean small l-liberals. From the liberal point of view, this society is actually pretty good. It is a society with basic democratic freedoms and equality of opportunity for all, more or less. It is a view that sees anyone, with a few exceptions, making it if they really try. It's a wealthy society, thanks to private enterprise, and while there are extremes of wealth and poverty, most of the wealth tends to trickle down to most

of the people, more or less. In the liberal point of view, this society is basically sound, deep down its institutions are solid, they provide the greatest good for the greatest number; the land is strong. No liberal is going to tell you that this is a *perfect* society. A liberal will tell you that changes are needed, but since the present system is fundamentally sound, we have to be careful about what and how much we change. And any liberal will tell you that when we look at the flaws in the social order, we must remember that, after all, poverty and injustice have always been with us, people are basically selfish and greedy, they always have been and always will be and you can't change human nature.

This is not the way we, as socialists, look at the society we live in. We know that the so-called flaws that liberals point to — poverty, for example, or the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few — are not accidental by-products of the system but are completely and inseparably part of the system. Indeed, because our society is based on a capitalist economy, laughably called free enterprise, the social wealth that all of us work every day to create is privately owned by a few. The wealthy in our society don't measure their wealth in jewels or harem girls or slaves. They measure it in terms of land, and factories, and banks, and buildings, and mines and forests. We don't have poverty in this society because there isn't enough to go around; we have poverty because the system is so structured that the social wealth people produce is held and owned by a small minority who use it to their own advantage. In short, as socialists we know that the problem of poverty is inextricably tied up with the problem of wealth, and that poverty is an essential part of the present system. *It is built into it.*

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Now liberals will never agree with this because if they do they have to admit that poverty is not going to be eliminated without making some very fundamental changes in the system of things. Of course they might agree with it and throw their hands up in the air and say you're right, nothing can be done except drop out. Or, they might agree with it but say there's nothing can be done about it anyway so let's put a bandaid on here and there and hope for the best, because after all, it's better to light one little candle than to curse the darkness.

The problem is a structural problem, and therefore the solution must be structural as well. We know that poverty will never be eliminated until the problem of wealth is dealt with, or in other words until there are basic changes in the way this society is structured. Solutions are not to be found in helping the poor and unemployed to adjust to being poor and unemployed, but in eradicating poverty and unemployment, which are rooted in the economy itself and inseparable from it. The basic problem with the poor is that they don't have enough money; with the unemployed, that there are not enough jobs. In the meantime we as socialists encourage the poor and the unemployed to get organized, to recognize that the problem is inextricably tied in with the system of things, and to demand the fundamental human right *not* to be poor and unemployed. We

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defend their right to develop their own solutions in their own way because they are the ones who know what they're up against, who experience the effects of poverty through every social institution and who know what structurally built-in poverty means.

I have dealt at some length on this question of poverty, to show that certain things are built into the social system and that the ways liberals and socialists respond to these things are very different because they have very different ways of viewing that social system. But there is ~~also something else to consider~~; and that is the basic difference between liberal democracy and socialist democracy.

To socialists, a bill of rights is not a statement of the way things are but of the way things ought to be, not a description of the present but a goal for the future. It is what we are aiming for. What is fundamental in the socialist concept of democracy, and where it differs from the liberal concept, is in the recognition that in this society all are indeed *not* equal; all indeed do *not* have equal opportunity. Not only are some individuals disadvantaged in relation to other individuals — indeed, this is always true, as some individuals are more intelligent, more athletic, more artistic, more energetic than others — but that this society builds in and generates inequalities and oppressions which affect entire groups.

It is not a question of whether this Indian is lazy or that poor person is untalented or this woman is stupid, nor of whether this Indian is energetic or that poor person is gifted or this woman is bright. These questions have nothing to do with the issue, which is that the present system condemns large sections of the population to low status, low income, and inferior positions not because of what they are as individuals, but because they belong to one or another of these groups. All may on paper have equal opportunity to climb to the heights of society, but in reality some groups have a ladder that starts in a hole, and some groups have only the hole. And it is there to see for all who would look that everything in this society — every social institution, be it the school system, the nature of employment, the legal system and the laws, and especially the economic system itself — militates against these people climbing out of the hole they start out in.

As socialists, it is paramount that we recognize the basic difference between a liberal democracy and a socialist democracy, and to recognize that if we are ever to have the egalitarian, non-exploitative society which we all talk of and dream of and work for, we must confront the fact that all are not equal. We must recognize that a very real and pervasive inequality affects many people not as individuals but as groups. The way to begin to correct this is systematically to change and, if necessary, dismantle

NB [those institutions that now perpetuate inequality and oppression, and to substitute for them new, socialist institutions.

And now, I would like to talk about women.

It is obvious that women in our society, even though we constitute a majority, bear all the hallmarks of an oppressed minority group. I do not have to go into all the gory details. In the educational system we are brain-

washed to be passive, to avoid excellence, to channel ourselves into limited rôles and limited ways of seeing ourselves. In employment we are encouraged to seek menial jobs, or else we are pressured to believe we can't or shouldn't work at all. Since we are subjected to the lowest jobs at the lowest pay, I do not have to talk about how many of us are captains of industry. Since we are NDP women here, I do not have to talk much about the extent of our political power or the extent to which we are equals in the political process.

And while we are both excluded from — and trained to exclude ourselves from — real participation in politics, education, employment, etc., we are also taught that in fact we are incapable of participating anyway. We are considered — and are trained to consider ourselves — to be stupid, or emotional, or, for some obscure biological reason that no one seems able to explain, to be physiologically and psychologically incapable of anything but the most menial of chores. Those of us who do break into these institutions, or try to, are reminded at every turn to exercise caution, or our children will fall into lives of crime and our husbands will leave us. And while we are confronted by these barriers that have been built against women — the socialization, the fears instilled, the rewards for being passive and the sanctions against excelling; confronted by a general view of women that sees us as either sex objects, drudges or shrews, that alternately praises and condemns us for whatever socially acceptable rôle we assume; confronted by the threats, guilt and coercion that maintain women in restrictive rôles; confronted by a system where most employment doors are closed to all but waitresses, secretaries and laundry workers, where women retreat gratefully to their homes to escape assembly lines and typing pools, only to apologize for being "just housewives", and where the full responsibility for raising children rests squarely on individual mothers with little help from any social institution; confronted by a situation where women who try to change these things, who try to throw off these barriers and assert their right not to be the leftovers of the labour force, the menial workers, the chattels and dependents, not to be pinched, poked, slapped and whistled at, where women who assert their right to a little human dignity are laughed at, ignored, ridiculed and condemned — confronted by all these barriers that are so familiar to every woman here, we are told that any woman can get ahead if she really wants to. Let me tell you that last week in the Legislature one of our NDP MLA's stood up and announced that a Ministry of Women's Rights was in effect a silly idea because in most cases women can make headway in society if they are qualified, and let me tell you that that man is either a damned fool or a damned liar.

There is no question about the social inequality of women. It is absolutely beyond debate. And if we see that women do suffer the same blanket discrimination and oppression that we recognize so well in the case of Indians or poor people, we must also look at the reasons for this. And there are really only two possible reasons. Either women are, in fact, inferior — inherently, naturally, biologically and eternally in-

ferior human beings; or women are not inferior but are placed in that position by forces extant in the society we live in. When one looks at the very extensive and systematic training of women to assume certain rôles and attitudes and not to assume others, it is clear that women are from the earliest moments of our lives, and throughout our lives, placed in that position.

NB In recognizing this, we are also recognizing something else — that the inequality of women is a structural inequality. Sexism, by which I mean the systematic discrimination against women because of our sex, is like racism, built into the society and inseparable from it. And if it is true that what women face is a social inequality which is absolutely and undeniably built into the system at every point of contact, and which has nothing at all to do with individual shortcomings or problems, then we are talking about a situation that cannot begin to be solved except on a structural level.

I mentioned earlier that for us as socialists, democracy does not mean assuming that everyone is equal and carrying on from there. It means instead that we recognize that on many levels equality does not exist and that, if we are serious about it, we must develop new ways and new institutions to ensure that it does exist.

This brings us to the question of the Ministry of Women's Rights.

NB The first thing to understand about the Ministry is that the idea was not conceived in the head of a bureaucrat, or by anyone concerned with channelling the women's movement into a bureaucracy. Nor was it conceived as a substitute for the women's movement. The idea first came from the NDP Women's Committee itself; it was seen not as a panacea for every ill but as a means to begin the task of breaking down the structural inequality that women face.

The Women's Committee conceived of the Ministry as two things: first, as a reaction to the fact that the problems women face are not problems with us but problems with the society, just as poverty is not a problem with the poor but a problem with the society. For the NDP government to establish a Ministry of Women's Rights would show women that the government recognizes that there is indeed a serious social problem, and that it is willing to take serious steps to solving it. This recognition is important because it is capable of generating a tremendous amount of encouragement and self-confidence and energy among women. Secondly, the Women's Committee conceived of the Ministry as a way to break into the vicious circle that always relegates the most important issues affecting women to low priority status. This is undeniably true in every field. Those of you in the trade union movement do not have to be told to what extent your jobs, your wages, your job security and your benefits are considered high priorities by your union. Those of you with small children do not have to be told about the availability of child care. Those of you involved in education, or who remember your own schooling or observe what your daughters are learning, do not have to be told about what happens to women and girls teaching and learning in the school

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system. And those of you who have ever had an abortion or wanted one, or who grapple with problems of birth control (which somehow is considered solely a woman's problem), or who have dealt with the problems of sterilization, know that neither the medical profession nor government health departments have too much time for the specific health problems and needs of women. The Women's Committee saw the Ministry as a way to begin the process of making these issues high instead of low — or lowest — priorities. The Ministry idea was initially proposed not as an end in itself but as a means to help women make their own decisions about their own problems and their own futures, and for the first time.

There are many things a Ministry of Women's Rights can do, and there are things that it cannot do. But before discussing these I would like to deal with some of the responses to this proposal — or rather to this aspect of NDP policy.

NB (First of all, it has become clear that a number of people — particularly men — oppose the concept of the Ministry not because of the Ministry *per se*, but because they are opposed to women's liberation. In stating their opposition to the Ministry they are in reality opposing the women's movement and denying that there is discrimination against or oppression of women. This is surely what the NDP MLA mentioned above was saying when he opposed the Ministry. By stating that most women can get where they want the same as everyone else, he was arguing that not only do women *not* need a Ministry, but they do not need anything. He posed no other solution because he recognized no problem, and I do not believe he is alone in the government in that belief.

(Secondly) some people have expressed opposition to the Ministry on the grounds that it's all a question of attitudes, that attitudes cannot be legislated, and that what must be done is to change people's attitudes. A variation of this argument is that no Ministry could ever be as effective as the simple will to change things on the part of those who hold power. I do not want to argue with either of these positions, except to say that they beg the question. Of course if everyone had a completely different attitude — if everyone in power were hell bent and determined to change the situation — a Ministry would not be needed. But how do you change attitudes? The way people look at the world does not suddenly emerge out of a vacuum. People don't live in a vacuum. They live in a real world in a specific type of society, in a particular situation and this world and society and situation shape their ideas and opinions and attitudes. The women's movement itself is not the product of a philosopher contemplating the universe or a propagandist composing political tracts. It grew out of the real and living experience of women.

(To say that attitudes must change before social structures or institutions is to put it the wrong way around. People believe what they are taught. If all the institutions and authorities of society continually reinforce the idea that X is right and Y is wrong, people will quite naturally believe that X is right and Y is wrong. People will not believe different things, or look at the world differently, or change their attitudes, until the institutions and authorities of society begin to teach them differently. This

George F. Armstrong

means the schools, the churches, the trade unions, the political parties, the media, the government, the legal system and the laws. None of these institutions will change of its own accord. That is why movements grow, to force these changes, and that is why it is incumbent upon socialists to support movements of people that are working for these changes. When these changes are made, attitudes will change.

A third objection to the Ministry has been raised: why not simply pressure the government to make these changes? I think the answer to this is quite simple: the government really can't do it. It would be nice if the Cabinet were so concerned about the issue of women that they consistently pushed it as a priority. But we would be kidding ourselves to think they are. I think it's safe to say that most people in the government simply don't understand the issue, and those who recognize the problem, who truly want to deal with it, do not know what to do. A government made up primarily of men can no more deal with the problems of women than middle-class people can deal with the problems of the poor or than white society can deal with the problems of Indians. Only Indians know what Indians face; only poor people know what poor people face; only women know what women face.

Finally, there is the objection that a Ministry of Women's Rights would not help women any more than a Department of Indian Affairs has helped Indians. I would agree with this, if a Ministry of Women's Rights were conceived by men, set up to enforce oppressive laws, and run by men. But that is not what we are talking about. Let me illustrate the difference: suppose that in this province the Indian people were organizing on every level and in every institution. Suppose they were demanding changes in education, in employment, in the legal system and the laws, demanding that the situation of Indians be determined by Indians themselves. And suppose that in the course of these many years of organizing they demanded their own Ministry, headed and staffed by Indians themselves in order to help them break down the barriers they face, to determine their own lives, free from the dominance of white society telling them what they should and should not have and do. What would our response be? Would we say that the Ministry is a silly idea, that most Indians can make headway in society if they are qualified? Would we say that this is a low priority, that we are not concerned about Indians but about people? Would we say that we don't want to divide Indians from white society? Would we say that the trouble isn't with the society but with people's attitudes? Would we say that the Indians are trying to hide behind a Ministry? Would we say the Indians are pleading for special favours from friends in high places?

We wouldn't say any of these things. And while I am not arguing that women as a group face the same problems as Indians — indeed, we would all agree that the oppression of Indians in our society is without parallel — I am arguing that the attitudes toward Indians, the stereotypes and debasement of Indians are of the same kind as those relating to women. There is sexism as well as racism, a blanket discrimination without

regard to individuals, and it is a discrimination built into every institution of society.

The Ministry of Women's Rights is not proposed as a substitute for organizing to change these institutions. Neither is it a crutch to lean on or a structure to hide behind. It is a very important means of stimulating and encouraging women to break through the barriers that confine them to a socially inferior status by giving them the power — the finances, the resources, and the authority — to start breaking those barriers down. What we, as socialists, argue for in relation to the labour movement — the right to strike, the shorter work week, the removal of repressive laws — none of these things is designed to replace the labour movement. They are designed to break down the barriers faced by the labour movement in order to help it organize. That is what the Women's Ministry is designed to do.

I do not want to go into details of what a Ministry could do. The women's movement itself has made clear the areas of prime concern: in labour, child care, education, health. Every woman who has worked or is working to change the abortion laws, prejudice in employment, the nature of education and so on knows the specific areas of concern that a Ministry ought to concentrate on. I do, however, want to mention some of the things a Ministry cannot do. A Ministry cannot take the place of women organizing. A Ministry will not end the social inequality of women. No significant social change is ever made by government decree alone, unless that decree reflects what is already happening in society at large, and is thus the reflection of a larger movement. But what the Ministry can do is to provide women with the tools to begin the systematic elimination of the root causes of oppression. It can create a situation where women themselves are encouraged to mobilize around the issues affecting them on every level and in every part of the province. It can stimulate women's centres throughout the province through direct funding and access to information and resources, and help to channel the fears and frustrations and anger of women into constructive and positive alternatives. And if that is all a Ministry of Women's Rights can do, it would be doing a very great deal, indeed.

I began this address by noting, with Germaine Greer, that women do not have to be socialists to be women's liberationists, but that it really does help. I would also say that the reverse is true: that women do not have to be women's liberationists to be socialists, but it helps there, too. When we talk about women's liberation, we are not talking about propelling ourselves towards some favoured position in society, of reversing the pattern of discrimination so that we, the women, are the oppressors and not the oppressed. Nor are we talking about gaining equality with oppressed men as our ultimate and final goal.

In recognizing and coming to grips with our own situation, in organizing to end the specific oppression we face, we come to realize that in this society there are many forms of oppression, that others as well as our-

selves have the right to organize to change the conditions of their lives, and that we have the obligation to support them just as we have the right to expect them to support us. We come to realize that if we are to achieve the goals we want, we will not be satisfied to trade the oppression of the kitchen for the oppression of the assembly line; nor will we be satisfied if some women are allowed to join some men in dominating the lives of the great majority of working men and women. We come to realize that the enemy is not men, but the system of things that pits sex against sex and race against race. Ultimately, despite the necessity of working now for our own goals, their full realization will not be achieved until this society is fundamentally changed, until we change those structures and institutions of our society and economy that lock us into our present situation, not only as women but as workers and as citizens. What our movement does now toward the liberation of women is one necessary part of the broader movement toward the liberation of all people. That human liberation is our final goal.

a good article
clear that when she talks about
structural solution she is
talking of fundamental changes necessary
to win women's liberation as against
reformism

We have no substantial disagreement
with this article - with her ideas
as expressed in this article

Something has happened to those who
think we do

perhaps they are doing it in a pardonable
in a written article - taking on ideas
not expressed here - but elsewhere

A MINISTRY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

SOME QUESTIONS ANSWERED

By THE 'PRIORITIES' EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

The following discussion is reprinted from Volume 1, No. 1 of 'Priorities' (January 1973), in which it was the feature article.

If the 1972 Provincial Convention did anything at all it was to raise the issue of the social inequality of women to a dominant position within the party. The resolution calling for the creation of a Ministry of Women's Rights in the next sitting of the Legislature, originally drafted by the Women's Committee and subsequently passed by several constituencies, received overwhelming endorsement on the convention floor.

Why this reaction? Clearly most of the delegates who supported the resolution did so from a belief that such a Ministry would be the best means of dealing with the complexities of women's present second-class status. But not all who voted in favour did so for this reason. Some — particularly men — supported the resolution simply because they felt that solutions to the problems affecting women must be made by women themselves.

Some, of course, opposed the motion for the worst possible reasons: an open hostility to women in general, a real fear for their own status (both men and women are subject to this pressure), or simply a deep-rooted sexism that refuses to see women as equal in any way, whether on the job, in the school, in politics or in bed.

But there were other people still who had mixed feelings on the issue. Whether they voted against or abstained, their feelings were that yes, indeed, *something* must be done to change the present status of women — but is a Ministry the way to do it? It is to this question that the following article is addressed.

I. What's the point of a Ministry of Women's Rights?

Establishing a Ministry of anything in a government is a recognition that some area, because of its general social importance or its complexities of problems, requires priority status. Establishing a Women's Ministry is in effect, a political statement that the problems facing women are not accidental flaws in the social fabric but are part and parcel of the whole political and social system. It is a political recognition that there is a thing called sexism — the constant subordination of women in all fields because of their sex — just as there is a thing called racism, and that this discrimination is so widespread it must be tackled with the same amount of energy

and resources that other areas require.

II. But couldn't a commission or an ombudswoman accomplish the same thing?

No. A Ministry would have power. Its Minister would be a cabinet minister and have the same access to money, resources and information that other cabinet ministers have. A commission, regardless of the intent, could only perform an advisory role and hope other cabinet ministers would rely on the advice. An ombudswoman deals only with specific grievances, and even if the specifics are part of a general social problem would not have the power or the resources to deal with the problem itself. She could bandaid symptoms but never deal with the causes. Furthermore, the creation of an ombudswoman implies that everything is basically all right but sometimes individuals have particular problems. But the problems of women are *not* individual or peculiar aberrations. They are an integral part of the social system, and *this* is what has to be changed.

III. Wouldn't a Ministry of Women create a special interest group and divide the people against each other?

First, women are not a "special interest group" like a real estate or a gun lobby. We represent over half the population, organizing *not* to gain some special privilege but to end a situation of generalized social inequality. Secondly, Ministries do not create social divisions. These are the products of social conditions caused by the unequal distribution of wealth and power. If discrimination against women did not already exist there would be no women organizing, just as trade unions would not exist if workers received the same benefits as owners.

There's nothing wrong or unusual about creating separate Ministries to deal with separate interests. The Department of Agriculture, for example, treats the problems and interests of farmers separate from those of the "general public". So does Labour, and Trade and Commerce. No-one complains about "dividing the people" in these areas. A Ministry of Women's Rights would not create social divisions between women and men. Instead, it would recognize that these divisions already exist and would act to eliminate their causes and to promote a *real* equality.

IV. Wouldn't a Ministry of Human Rights do the same thing?

Not very well. A Human Rights Department would quickly become the catch-all for every social problem existing. Because the social inequality of women would be only one problem among many, it would quickly fall to the same low priority status it has now. It would be lumped together along with the rest of society's "miscellaneous" by those unable to appreciate the problems affecting women and who often believe that these problems are just not very important.

V. But wouldn't a Women's Ministry be a catch-all too?

No, although it would have jurisdiction over various areas affecting women. But a complexity of issues only becomes a catch-all if a vaguely-defined department has no power, resources or the direction needed to deal with them. The major point behind the Ministry is that of power and

direction, and no lesser structure would have this.

VI. Wouldn't a Women's Ministry overlap with other departments?

Definitely. But overlapping already exists in many areas: welfare, health, education, to name only a few. In a planned economy overlap is necessary and desirable. There's no reason why the Minister of Welfare, for example, could not work with a Minister of Women's Rights in areas relevant to both.

VII. Can't we trust an NDP government to act in women's interests on its own?

We can expect an NDP government to be more aware of the problem than the Socreds. But let's face it: the government is made up primarily of men who, with the greatest will in the world, do not and can not understand the problems facing women as women understand them — or, in some cases, even recognize them as problems. Women's own experience in trade unions, peace organizations, left movements and the NDP itself gives ample evidence of this. If it were otherwise there would be no women organizing in any of these concerns — yet these are where the women's movement began.

VIII. But wouldn't a Women's Ministry become a bureaucratic stranglehold on women, like Indian Affairs over Indians?

Not at all. Indians suffer under Indian Affairs departments because

(Continued on Page 24)

PRIORITIES

PRIORITIES is a monthly newsletter published by the B.C. NDP Women's Committee.

It carries reports on the activities of women members of the NDP throughout the province, special attention being given to the efforts of women to formulate and work for the implementation of NDP policy on women's rights.

The Newsletter seeks to analyse women's problems in special areas and keeps an eye on legislation being passed (or not being passed!) by the provincial government so that women in the NDP can keep their MLA's working towards the goals the B.C. NDP Women's Caucus have had adopted as party policy over the years.

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they have no control over them. They are staffed largely by white, middle-class men who do not understand Indian life and culture and whose job is to administer discriminatory laws. A Women's Ministry, headed and staffed by women, would be free of the male-dominated, conservative bureaucracy that existing departments are burdened with. Having no existing mould to squeeze into, it could start out on the basis of the experiences and understandings of the women themselves, integrated with the workings and goals of the women's movement as a whole.

IX. What could a Women's Ministry actually do?

Plenty! It could enforce existing laws and, where these laws are inadequate, could initiate new laws in areas that are now considered low-priority. In the field of health, for example, it could draw up its own legislation to change laws and practices that affect only women: abortion, some surgical practices, maternity care and so on in conjunction with the Health Ministry. It could ensure new laws in education, labour, child care and other areas that presently treat women unfairly. It could develop long-term plans for ensuring equal opportunity for women in all fields while redressing specific grievances in the short terms. A Ministry could also stimulate strong grass-roots activities throughout BC by encouraging decentralized Women's Centres where women could help evolve solutions to their own problems. It could, in short, act to effect significant changes in the status of women.

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